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COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

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VA Officials Give Little Explanation on Veteran Mental Health Care Concerns

WASHINGTON, D.C.—Today, the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs called upon VA to explain how mental health services have devolved into a lack of accessibility and care for veterans in need as exposed in an April [VAOIG Report](#).

The IG found that VA's measurement data for mental healthcare is "not accurate or reliable," that the measures have "no real value," and that on average more than 50 percent of veterans who request a mental health evaluation wait an average of 50 days as opposed to VA's reported 14 days. Just prior to the release of the VAOIG Report, VA announced that it was in the process of hiring 1,900 additional mental health clinicians and support staff to address understaffing in VA's mental health network. It is estimated that VA would need more than 1,500 additional staff to fill the current vacancies in the system.

"A veteran who comes to VA for help should never, under any circumstance, have to wait almost two months to receive the evaluation they have asked for and begin the treatment they need. There is no excuse for this and no one has taken responsibility," stated Rep. Jeff Miller, Chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs. "It appears that VA's response in this instance is yet another example of a federal bureaucracy providing a quick-fix, cookie-cutter solution to a very serious, multifaceted problem."

In response to questions posed by the Committee, Secretary Shinseki stated that VA has been in a "react cycle," and there is a need to formulate a "clear standard for the future." The Secretary stated further that VA needs "better coordination" between services and there is "more to be done. We need as many tools as we can get and find a balance that is both efficient and cost-effective."

There was bipartisan consensus among Committee Members that VA should provide veterans with more community resources for care. "Rather than wait for VA to fix the current problems, veterans should be given the choice to find care elsewhere, preferably in our communities," stated Rep. Ann Marie Buerkle, chairwoman of the Subcommittee on Health.

"I would like to see from VA, the priority that has been placed on veteran homelessness, mirrored in mental health care for our veterans," Miller said. "The metric we should be using is simple: Are veterans getting care and are they getting better? Mental health access is, in many cases, a question of life and death. That is the most important outcome."

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